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AUTHOR Baruch, Grace K.
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ABSTRACT

In the past, guilt has been seen primarily through male eyes and has been a neglected topic thus far in the renaissance of studies of women and gender. There may be a greater vulnerability to guilt in women as compared to men. Given childhood's influence on guilt and on the adult conscience, struggle, conflict, and uncertainty in adulthood seem inevitable. Guilt can be both valuable and destructive. Risk factors for guilt in women include: (1) women's socialization to take responsibility for the well-being of others; (2) women's dilemmas about balancing their own needs with their perceived responsibilities to others; (3) empathy; (4) withdrawal of love for girl children; (5) lower status and power of women; and (6) self-blame. Research data is lacking on men; men's socialization, too, needs to be understood. A preliminary study of women and their guilt is forthcoming. There is so little research on gender and guilt in adults that identifying various categories of guilt should help both women and men to better understand themselves and each other. Overall, guilt is a strong medicine that may maintain and heal bonds but may also sicken in overdose. Perhaps, especially for women, it can have dangerous side effects with respect to self-esteem and the sense of empowerment. (ABL)

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Jan Putnam
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This talk is my first presentation of reflections and ideas -- what I call pre-hypotheses --concerning guilt and gender. I am in the early stages of a project sponsored by the Rockefeller Gender Roles Program that examines the concept of guilt and its role in the lives of women and men. At this stage, I have many more questions than answers.

In the past, guilt has been seen primarily through male eyes -- Freud of course comes to mind -- and has been a neglected topic thus far in the renaissance of studies of women and gender. In such books as Every Woman's Emotional Well-Being, (Tavris, 1986), for example, there are chapters on self-esteem, sexuality, and work but not on guilt.

We need to reexamine our concept of and knowledge about the topic of guilt for at least two further reasons. First, a variety of scholars, e.g., Gilligan (1982), have suggested there is a greater vulnerability to guilt in women, compared to men. As Barth noted at the 2nd International Interdisciplinary conference on women, often the guilt is inappropriate, de-energizing, even paralyzing and can be an obstacle to needed social change.

Second, prior theories, drawing mainly from Freud, predict that men will have stronger consciences and thus experience greater guilt than women. Yet according to such scholars as Martin Hoffman (Hoffman, 1976; Thompson & Hoffman, 1980), empirical research shows the opposite: that females are guiltier than males and this difference increases as they move from childhood to adolescence (and presumably to adulthood). This discrepancy between theory

and findings suggests that we do not yet have the right conceptual tools, empirical knowledge, or perhaps even the language to understand guilt.

WHAT IS GUILT?

We label many different phenomena "guilt". One task I am beginning is a kind of taxonomy -- to sort out the many forms and elements that make up the complex of emotions, thoughts, values, judgments, etc. that we call guilt.

Willard Gaylin (1979) and Helen Block Lewis (1971) both see guilt as a kind of social glue that facilitates group life and maintains the interdependence necessary to humans. When bonds are threatened, Lewis says, guilt works overtime to repair them. When a group member is wronged, for example, the perpetrator's guilt sends a message, "I care, please accept me back in your good graces. See, I am suffering as I made you suffer". The capacity to feel and express a sense of wrongdoing thus can be seen in part as a valuable component of human nature.

Gaylin also argues that our sense of guilt is "the guardian of our goodness". Here, I do not agree. Many of the feelings and thoughts that make up our conscience and thus influence our experience of guilt were formed in childhood when, as Piaget says, we were "afflicted with dependency, affection, fear." Given childhood's influence on guilt and on the adult conscience, struggle, conflict and uncertainty in adulthood seem inevitable. In short, the sense of guilt can be both valuable and destructive. Mary Cantwell, writing in Vogue Magazine, in 1982 (October, p. 154), believes guilt

in women's lives is "as dangerously indiscriminate as bacteria which, rushing forth to fight infection, destroy good tissue along with the bad."

The major question that I am asking is, "Are women in fact the guilty sex and, if so, why?" I have not yet begun to study men but have collected data from 256 women participating in a larger study, co-directed by Rosalind Barnett and myself, on stress in Licensed Social Workers and Licensed Practical Nurses. For a description of the study, see Marshall, Barnett, & Baruch (forthcoming). (To begin to study men, I will collect data from the husbands of married respondents.) Before describing the data from the women, I will set forth briefly "risk factors" for women in relation to guilt that are suggested by a variety of current research and theory and that imply gender differences.

1. From a social role perspective, women have -- at least traditionally -- been socialized to take responsibility for the well-being of others. Studies such as those by Ronald Kessler and his colleagues (Wethington, McLeod, & Kessler, 1987) show that: (a) women are expected to involve themselves in "other people's troubles", not only in the nuclear family but in relation to social ties -- neighbors, friends, etc. (b) they do involve themselves; and (c) they suffer stress from their involvement.

2. A main issue addressed in Carol Gilligan's work concerns women's dilemmas about balancing their own needs with their perceived responsibilities to others. Whatever exacerbates this dilemma heightens the possibility of and vulnerability to guilt. In an important empirical study by Ford and Lowery

(1986), it was found that although some gender differences predicted by Gilligan's work were not supported, women, more often than men, when asked to generate a real life moral dilemma, mentioned one involving issues of caring for others vs. caring for one's own needs. For both men and women, this type of dilemma was rated as the most difficult and troublesome; however, women rated these as more difficult than did men. Thus women seem more often to face the type of moral dilemmas likely to cause the most anguish.

3. The topic of empathy has been the subject of long term work by developmental psychologists such as Martin Hoffman. As Hoffman describes the development of empathy, the first step is the awareness of distress of another, an awareness very young children can have. Theorists of women's development such as Chodorow (1978) argue that because of the greater similarity and identification between mothers and daughters, compared to mothers and sons, and the closeness of early mother-daughter relationships, there is early fertile ground for a special empathy between them. The end point in adulthood, especially for females, can be feeling responsible for and guilty about others' distress (Hoffman, 1975).

4. Studies show that parental childrearing techniques are more likely to involve the use of withdrawal of love when the child is a girl. This early association of the withdrawal of love with wrongdoing may result later in women's thinking "I must have done something wrong" whenever love or approval is withdrawn, even when such thoughts are inappropriate.

5. Scholars interested in the influence of group social status and power on behavior suggest that the lower status and lesser power of women, compared with men, may result in greater sensitivity to cues from more powerful others. Thus for adaptive, even protective, reasons, women may be acutely aware of and responsive to messages of anger and hurt, whether deserved or not -- messages which are often triggers of guilt.

6. Finally, the lively and fertile area of research on attribution theory focuses in part on issues of blame, responsibility, and self-blame (Shaver, 1985) in studying how we explain success and failure and negative and positive events to ourselves. Such researchers as Weiner and Graham (1984) are interested in the relationship of attributions to emotions, and find that when a negative event is attributed to some factor controllable by oneself, the resulting emotion is likely to be guilt. Women seem more likely to view failure or negative events in this way. Interestingly, by changing just one variable in one's thinking, that is, by attributing a negative outcome to a cause that is controllable not by oneself but by another, the resulting emotion is likely to be anger -- blaming another rather than oneself (Graham, Doubleday & Guarino, 1984).

Lacking any data on men, I offer only anecdotal evidence on the pre-hypothesis that men tend to blame others and thus be more guilt avoidant than women. Gaylin (1979) tells the story of a typical male guilt experience, of a man who, rather than experience self-blame, lashes out at his wife because he left his wallet at the grocery store; it was her fault because she sent him

there for some milk! It is easier to feel anger than guilt, Gaylin says, but this, I believe, is less true for women than for men (see Lerner, 1985).

A second intriguing account is that of Margaret Smith (no date), who interviewed women whose children had experienced major problems -- with drugs, mental illness, etc. The mothers reported that often the worst part of their own reaction was the sense of guilt. A related theme was their surprise about the apparent absence of guilt in their husbands. In some cases, the fathers of the children seemed actively to be refusing to feel guilty, that is, actually considering and rejecting the idea.

A third example is from a study of fathers' family roles that I carried out with Rosalind Barnett (Baruch & Barnett, 1986) that looked at the reactions of fathers and their wives to the stresses of combining employment and family. We found that men tended to blame their wives for poor allocation or management of time and for other role conflict problems. Women, in contrast, tended to blame themselves for putting their husbands and children in a difficult situation.

It would be a mistake to see men as insensitive villains who never suffer from guilt. Rather, we need to understand how men's socialization and social roles may support and even require guilt avoidance in certain areas. Denial of guilt and conversion of guilt to anger may operate differently in different arenas of life. For example, we can explore whether men experience feelings of guilt around issues of achievement (or failure to achieve) more readily than in their relationships. Moreover, for men, achievement issues

may be tied to how they experience themselves in relation to family and others.

False Guilt

I come now to a central pre-hypothesis of my work, that women are more at risk for what I call 'false guilt', that is, guilt that arises not primarily from a sense that we have violated our internal standards of right and wrong, but rather that is triggered by others' distress or disapproval, by a fear of disconnection and separation rather than by the pangs of conscience. Recall the message of guilt that Gaylin and Lewis describe: "I am suffering, take me back". Vulnerability to concern about disconnection (see Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 1984) may cause women to convert feelings of loneliness, fear, and especially anger into guilt or to say 'it is my fault'. Research on victimization tells us that one "advantage" of feeling "it is my fault" may be the belief: "I can control this and undo this". That is, in a way, we may indirectly seek some measures of control through guilt. Thus, if women are vulnerable to this pattern, rather than being a mysterious deficiency it may be adaptive in certain situations.

PRELIMINARY DATA ON WOMEN

As noted above, I have collected data from a longitudinal interview study of several hundred women social workers and LPN's who are part of a study funded by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health and co-directed with Rosalind Barnett. Subjects were randomly selected from professional registries (see Marshall et al., forthcoming). In 1986-1987, as

part of an annual questionnaire mailed to subjects and collected when they are interviewed in person, I included three questions about guilt, questions based on the work of Mandel (1976). Working within the Kohlberg tradition, Mandel suggests in her doctoral thesis that there may be stages of guilt. She interviewed 34 young women and men, ages 15 - 30. and noted a sequence in their responses about guilt. For example, the reasons given for guilty feelings seem tied to changing age-related concepts of the self in relation to others. One change was from responding to another's critique as a cause of guilt, to feeling guilty when violating "one's own best self".

The questions asked of women in our study were:

1. What kinds of things make you feel guilty?
2. What happens when you feel guilty; what do you do, what are your thoughts?
3. How do you make yourself feel better; how do you try to make guilt go away?

(I also included a single-item, 7-point scale asking "How much of a problem is guilt in your life?" These quantitative responses, not analyzed yet, will permit some analyses in relation to other variables measured in the study, such as anger, anxiety, and self-esteem.)

Frequent themes I have noted based on preliminary content analyses of the data from the women are:

1. (What kinds of things make you feel guilty?) The central themes are: not doing enough for others; hurting others' feelings; and "other people being unhappy or feeling neglected", e.g., "living a long distance from my mother". Other responses included variations on: "not being perfect" and "you name it".

Overall, guilt feelings seemed at least as tied to others' reactions as to a violation of internal moral standards.

2. (What happens when you feel guilty?) Frequent themes are exemplified by: "I try harder"; "I do more for others"; and "I berate myself, I feel that I am an awful person". Only rarely do women report that they get angry at the other persons involved in guilt-provoking situations. Rather, self accusation and attempts at self improvement are common.

3. (How do you make yourself feel better?) Typical coping responses women report are: "I talked to a friend or spouse", "I think about why it's ok". (Women often call the latter "rationalizing".) Many report exercising, described as a general stress reducer. Others mention shopping, seen both as positive and negative, and eating and obsessing, viewed as mainly negative.

CONCLUSION

I will soon collect similar questionnaire data from the male spouses of the women. Future research steps are to do in-depth interviews with other groups of women and men, for example, women who are not in the helping professions, those in situations that arouse guilt, such as divorce, and men who are facing problems in the achievement area, such as not meeting their goals. There is so little research on gender and guilt in adults that identifying various categories of guilt should help both women and men to better understand themselves and each other.

Overall, I see guilt as a strong medicine that may maintain and heal bonds but may also sicken in overdose. Perhaps especially for women, it can

have dangerous side effects with respect to self esteem and the sense of empowerment.

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